

# Without a Struggle

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When Brock Harrisburg's wife left him, he pretty much let her go without a struggle. She'd been driving down to Sioux Falls for night classes once a week, and one night, during her second semester, he called the private university to ask to talk to Camelia Harrisburg, to report that her mother had a heart attack. Camelia's uncle had called to tell him the bad news. She always turned off her phone while in class and didn't turn it back on until she came home, so he hoped there was somebody who could peek their head into the classroom and call her out. He still remembered the moment in slow motion—he'd been holding the phone, the TV was on quietly in the background, and his empty dinner plate still set on the couch cushion next to him as he waited for the secretary to look up Camelia's name on the roster.

"Accounting 101," he said, trying to help.

"Account—" the secretary said, and paused. "We don't offer an Accounting 101. There's Finance 131. Could you spell her last name?"

After he got off the phone, he paced back and forth waiting for her to get home. He flipped past a hundred channels seeking an answer to what could have happened. He refused to let his worst suspicions take hold. He called back the secretary and told her maybe it was Camelia Hunt, her maiden name.

"We don't have a Camelia enrolled this semester, sir," she said flatly. "Are you sure you have the right university?"

"No, I'm not sure anymore," he said.

Embarrassed, confused, and breaking into a sweat, Harrisburg cursed the secretary for not caring, told her it was an emergency, to check her list again. He said rotten things and she hung up, leaving a sickening buzzing in his ear. The buzzing continued after he dropped the phone. It swelled into a low hum, like the city had suddenly erected a powerline over their house. He went to the spare bedroom, opened the window, and hopped on their home gym while the chilly fall air blew through the room. The physical exertion kept his mind busy for a few minutes, but then he realized he'd have to call back Camelia's

uncle. And tell him what? She doesn't exist on Tuesday nights? She steps out the door, into a black hole, and she returns whenever she feels like it? Maybe it was all a big mistake. Maybe she hadn't enrolled properly and they didn't have her on the list but she was attending classes thinking she was. He almost called back, but remembered how he'd acted toward the secretary and decided to leave it alone. The class went from seven to ten—late, but the university was for working adults. Sometimes she went out for a drink with a couple of classmates and didn't get home until after midnight, after he was in bed. He couldn't hack a whole day at the store if he didn't get to sleep before midnight.

He rowed vigorously on the gym. The plastic wheel whirled inside as he tugged the cables. Of course it had to be a mix up. She'd taken holidays off. Columbus Day, most recently. Camelia even felt too tired some evenings to drive the half hour for class. "I can skip a few," she said. He didn't care much. It was her life, her degree. She was paying for it herself out of her own paycheck. He didn't have any hopes that she'd actually graduate and land a decent job—not with taking one course every semester. They'd be retired by the time she walked up the aisle to receive her diploma.

Harrisburg worked out most of that night, exhausting himself, holding back the boiling worry that burned in his belly, until he heard a key slip into the lock and her high heels click on the linoleum. It was nearing eleven. Not as late as some nights she came home.

He'd planned what to say to her. He met her in the entryway, shirtless.

"You're still up," Camelia said. She set her bag on the couch. The one holding the textbook, notebook, and little purse of pens.

"Just keeping busy exercising," he said. He focused on looking at her like he always looked at her. He didn't want to signal anything was wrong. "What about you?" Harrisburg went back into the spare bedroom to grab his shirt from the floor. He balled it into a rag and wiped his neck and chest.

"Just another night at class," she said. "Accounting is kicking my butt."

"Maybe you just need to study more. I mean, I never see you doing homework." He tossed the shirt onto the couch as she removed her jacket and hung it up in the closet.

"I know, I have to hit the books more. But I'm so tired, darling, you'd better let me get to sleep."

He knew he should be getting on with the news about her mother, and that whatever shame he could dump on her when he found out where she really went every week would be diminished by his holding back the serious information. "How do I get a hold of you if I need you for an emergency?" he asked.

She glanced at him but held his gaze an extra second. "My phone," she said. "How else?"

"You turn it off during class."

"It's better so I can concentrate."

"So if there's an emergency, what do I do?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Leave me a message?"

"I mean a serious emergency. Should I call the university?"

"Nobody works there at night. The secretary goes home." She brushed past him and stood in front of the bathroom sink. "Unless this is about something important, I've got to sleep. I've got a conference call early and I might have to write up new promos."

He knew her conference call was not important. It was an optional company call, where some of the team leaders gushed about the pots of gold they'd all make if they could each just sponsor ten new people. Harrisburg thought of all Camelia's attempts to score big with affiliate marketing. All those sickening phone calls to "potentials," when her voice thickened and poured out of her as sticky and sweet as the honey from the jars they bought from the bee farmer in Flandreau. How he cringed, knowing she was lying, or exaggerating about the merits of the product or the compensation plan of the company. And always, an endless pursuit of new clients, potential distributors, and the possibility of losing out to another affiliate shark in the water. Most times the week ended in tears—the small paychecks she generated just enough to pay for her classes. But now he wondered what classes those were. If he dropped the news that her mother was in critical condition ten hours away, in Livingston, he'd never get an answer about where

she'd been. She obviously hadn't received the message yet. He had to tell her soon. Her mother could already be dead, for all he knew. Her uncle Jim sounded pretty miserable on the phone, like he wasn't holding out much hope, despite the doctors having stabilized her.

Harrisburg wasn't a cruel man. But Camelia was taller than he was, and a little out of his league, so that he wanted to know straightaway if what was happening involved another man. A taller man. A man with a career, who didn't work retail. She'd always been tight-lipped about her business, about where she'd been when she didn't make it home on time. She'd always been like that while they were dating, but he thought she was just guarding her future, scanning the field until she knew he was the right one. He'd done all he could to assure her of that, tried to fit every mold he thought she might desire. Every tone, every glance had held a clue for him during that year of dating, as to what he might improve upon, or how he might alter himself favorably in her eyes. Persistence paid off. She accepted his proposal the second time. But still, she kept too many areas of her life and emotions dark to him. He'd hoped their marriage would be enough to secure her and open her up to him. Yet every morning he seemed to start at zero.

"I called," he said. He was way off script. In his mind, he'd had her sweating, apologizing, and then confessing whatever secret she held. He could take it if she said flat out whatever it was. He couldn't take it if he never found out.

"Sorry, babe, sometimes when the phone is off, it won't send me the new message until the next day. I'm not sure why that is. I just turned it back on. Did you even leave a message?" she asked. She leaned toward the mirror and began wiping the liner from her eyes with a wet rag.

"I called the university, I mean." He sat on the bed. Her side, with the electric blanket under the comforter. His head felt too light, and a sad tingling crawled through his right side. "I called the university and —"

"Like I said, you won't get anybody."

"I did. A secretary. I was pretty rude to her when she insisted you weren't enrolled there."

Her hand, poised between her face and the mirror, paused. Harrisburg held his breath. She went back to wiping her eyes and said, "That doesn't make sense. She's probably new there."

All at once, Harrisburg felt like the biggest idiot in the world. Like all the shallow, stupid male figures he watched on TV. Too dumb to know any better, and too aggressive and quick to accuse their wives of something malicious. The secretary didn't know how to look up the rosters correctly. That was it.

"Why would you call, anyway?" Her voice had an edge. "I don't need people at the school thinking my husband checks up on me." She swore quietly.

Harrisburg felt his conviction rise again. "It's the 21st century. It's not hard for even a new secretary to look up a name. She couldn't find yours. She said there was nobody named Camelia enrolled." He stood, his legs felt shaky, maybe from the working out, but maybe not. "Where were you?"

"This is ridiculous," she said and stopped wiping her eyes.

"Where do you go each week?"

She threw down the cloth, rushed straight to the bed, and pulled back the covers. Reaching behind the headboard, she clicked on the electric blanket and got under the sheets still wearing her blouse and pants.

"Just what are you saying, anyway?" She held up a hand and let out a laugh. "I actually don't want to know. Let me go to sleep. I have to study tomorrow. We have an exam next week, at the university that I guess doesn't exist." She drew the covers up to her cheek and closed her eyes.

Harrisburg reached behind him and switched on the bright vanity bulbs above the sink and mirror. The bed and Camelia were flooded in light.

It reminded him of the old days, the happy, care-free days, when he was in high school and he and his friend Dick went out spotlighting coyotes and coons. Totally illegal to shoot at them out the truck's open window, but they were kids, and it was better than going to the bowling alley. Seeing his wife's furrowed brow and squinted eyes gave him pleasure, like he had her locked in the hot seat and she'd finally cut loose whatever it was she was hiding. He wanted to see every inch of her face when she squirmed out of

telling the truth and crafted a shitty lie.

"It's not the university that doesn't exist," he said, "it's you who doesn't seem to exist." Weeks later he'd revel in that line, especially when he felt his worst. If only he hadn't been so devastated. "I wanna know where you're going each week."

She kept her eyes closed, but more tightly than before. Her bleached hair draped across the pillow. Hair he loved so much because it reminded him of the models on TV, but for the two years they'd been married, he'd come to realize it was as much of an effect as her fake smile when she humored him, or her empty little moans when he finished up on her. Her real hair color, as dull as a muddy puddle, a color she'd never shown him in person, but that he'd only seen in her high school photos her mother showed him, was part of a person she hid from him and everybody else, and standing by the bed that night, he understood their relationship had shriveled up a long time before that moment, maybe had never even blossomed in the first place, and that he'd known it was empty all along but had done nothing about it. He'd been as fake as she'd been.

When she didn't answer him, and her eyelids smoothed out so he could tell she wasn't squeezing them, he said quietly, "Tell me where you go." She kept silent. Harrisburg said to the room, "I suppose she's fallen asleep already. After a long night of who knows what." He grabbed the covers and yanked them clean off the bed.

Camelia sat up, her eyes wide and her arm held up in defense. He remembered the morning a few months after they'd married when she woke up sick, but was determined to get to a meeting, and had dressed fully, ready to go out the door, but became so dizzy she fell back into the bed and laid there in her gray slacks and white blouse until the afternoon.

"Got your attention now?" he asked. He swiped a handful of her hair and pulled her out of the bed. She screamed and slapped his ear. He let go of her. Pain shot through him, a spike shoved deep into his head.

"I don't have to take this," she said. "I'm so tired of this." She grabbed her phone off the floor, unsteadily barged into the bathroom, and slammed the door. The lock clicked.

He turned off the vanity lights and avoided looking in the mirror. His hands were trembling. His mouth had gone dry. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry. But you've been lying, and I want to know the truth." There was silence from the other side of the door.

Harrisburg never did find out, exactly. He had his opinions, his circumstantial evidence, but no admission of guilt. Shortly after she locked herself in the bathroom, the shower started. She didn't come out for over an hour. He stared at the TV, knowing his day at the store was going to be miserable for more than just lack of sleep.

From the bedroom he heard a zipping noise. She pulled a large suitcase in to the entryway.

"This should have happened a long time ago," she said. Her phone started ringing. Its familiar tune dug a pit in Harrisburg's stomach—losing her suddenly seemed like too much to bear. He thought of telling her it was all right, everything would be OK, that any secret was better than splitting up. But then his mood switched, suddenly angry, overcome by not knowing where she'd been going, who she'd been with.

"You'd better answer that," he said, and nodded toward her bag, suddenly remembering her uncle's hoarse voice all those hours ago on the phone. "It's probably about your mother."

Camelia opened the door. The ringing stopped. He listened to her steps as they retreated into the night. When he checked his phone, he saw there were half a dozen missed calls from her uncle. He'd never see her in person again.